

# Counting the Cost of Discipleship

## *Being a 'High Expectation' Congregation*

Luke 14:25-33  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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August 29, 2010

There is a very wise saying, "If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is." Other similar sayings include, "There's no free lunch," and, "Everything comes with a price." And yet, it seems that we're always on the lookout to try to get something for nothing. While this may occasionally work at garage sales, it usually doesn't when it comes to life itself. **For in reality, everything does come with a cost of one sort or another.**

During this economic recession, nearly everyone is thinking twice before spending money on the usual big-ticket items like appliances, electronics, cars, vacations, house renovations, even new clothes and the like. Reports out just reveal the biggest percentage monthly drop in home sales ever. Even stranger, the birth rate in this country has dropped to a 100 year low. Analysts say this is primarily because couples are counting the financial cost of raising a child during this economic downturn.

**The need to count the cost applies to more than just financial cost, however.** Ask anyone who is a parent and they will tell you about cost of time, commitment, patience, and emotional energy necessary to raise a child. It also takes a lot of time, commitment, patience, and emotional energy to make a relationship a healthy one. Just ask anyone who has been married or in a committed relationship for a long time. Ask anyone who is an accomplished musician or singer, or an athlete, and they will tell you about the cost of hours and hours of practicing in order to be good at what they do.

Speaking personally, I have been counting the cost of time and energy on a couple of big items lately. I was asked by Phillips Theological Seminary, upon referral by Greg Coulter, the General Presbyter of Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery, to be an adjunct professor this fall to teach Presbytery Polity at the seminary. Classes begin later this week on Thursday.

Counting even a bigger cost, I will be purchasing and closing on a home on Friday of this week – and then moving from the house I have been renting since coming to Tulsa 2 ½ years ago. By the way, this is the first home I have purchased since losing a house 24 years ago in the oil industry crash of the late 1980s, back when I was a geologist in the Houston area.

No, nothing worth very much in life is truly free. And if we really want something, we better count the cost before we purchase something, or start a project, or enter into a relationship, or join an organization, or begin a new job, or move, or whatever. For if we don't, we make ourselves more vulnerable to discouragement, or tempted to give up, or perhaps even fail.

This important life principle, as we learn in today's Gospel Lesson from Luke 14, applies to being a disciple of Jesus as well. **Jesus warns the crowd that there is a heavy**

**price to pay in following him, and they better count the cost first to see if they're really willing to pay it.**

These words still apply today, especially when it comes to church leadership. While this certainly applies to pastors, it also applies to those who volunteer to be church school teachers, or choir members, or elders on the session, or on one of the church's ministry teams, or even as an active member of a congregation itself.

Jesus uses two parables to make his point. The first one is similar to the example I gave of renovating a house, especially if it includes building on a new room. Drawing on an example from farming life, we hear about a person who wants to build a tower in a vineyard from which the farmer can stand watch against thieves and wild animals. To begin to build such a tower and have to abandon the project when it was just half completed (because one has run out of money) would make the builder look like a fool. In that ancient culture, and to an extent today, that would cause much shame.

Similarly, the second parable, set in the context of international politics, assumes common sense on the part of a king contemplating waging war on an enemy. No wise king would *knowingly* lead an army into slaughter or into a situation where they couldn't be victorious. But how many times throughout history has this wisdom not been followed?!

**The point of the two parables is that at the very least a wise person will try to avoid disaster or failure. One must recognize, therefore, the cost before beginning a venture, and then choose one's course carefully, realistically, and prayerfully.**

**This principle, Luke rightly reminds us, applies to faithful discipleship as well.** For in its biblical context, true discipleship does not mean simply tagging along behind Jesus – or, in Luke's setting, to become a member of the church – in a rush of enthusiasm that evaporates as quickly as it appears when the going gets rough.

Jesus, therefore, makes some extremely harsh statements about the requirements of discipleship. Luke records, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." He continues, "None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."

You know, I almost decided not to preach on this assigned lectionary reading this morning in order to avoid these very difficult and indeed hard to hear sayings. But perhaps they are just the words you or I might need to here at this particular time and place.

We must proceed with caution, for if taken literally it would be easy to read these sayings as equating discipleship with total neglect of one's own family in the pursuit of some higher spiritual goal. This, however, would be a misreading of these verses. Of course we are not to literally "hate" our parents and abandon our children. Nor are we to hate ourselves or life itself. That would be in direct contradiction to Jesus' commandment to love God, our neighbors as ourselves, and even our enemies. It would also contradict the Ten Commandments – specifically the one commanding us to honor our mother and father.

Rather, **instead of their identity being tied to blood relatives, they are now part of a new family identity with fellow disciples – a new community of faith.** What is demanded of disciples is that in the network of many loyalties in which all of us live, the claim of God and the gospel not only takes precedence but also redefines the others commitments. This can and will, at times, necessarily involve some detaching, some

turning away – even from family – in order to be a true disciple of Jesus. That's a price many are simply not willing to pay.

**Jesus sharply confronts us with the priority of our commitments. That's why Jesus warns us to count the cost of discipleship before saying 'yes'.**

Yet, in order to fill the pews in declining congregations today, **perhaps churches simply make the decision to become a church member too easy. We are tempted to not challenge people.** We often don't really challenge others (or ourselves) to faithful stewardship, faithful worship attendance, faithful sexuality, honest business practices, compassion for the less fortunate, and other costly commitments.

Perhaps, goes the thinking, if we don't ask too much, visitors (and members for that matter) will return. But in the long run, is that really being fair by not sharing God's, and therefore our, expectations? Perhaps we need to be more intentional about warning people about the price of association, of what being an active church member really entails. Perhaps we need to ask, "Do you know what you're getting yourself into? Do you realize what church membership really means?" Do we?

One biblical commentator writes, "A church that does not spell this out clearly to prospective members, or to its constituency, proves false to the good news." Another states, "The irony is that churches with high standards attract people with high standards. Their integrity and commitment draw others. Soon their pews are full."

**Do we dare take the risk of declaring ourselves a "high expectation" congregation?**

Jesus does not make discipleship easy. He does not offer an easy payment plan. He never tries to disguise the cost of discipleship – so neither should we. Instead, Jesus writes the price tag large for all to see.

Concerning the issue of true and deep commitment, Dallas Willard, professor of philosophy at the University of Southern California bluntly claims, **"A person can be a Christian without being a disciple."** Think about that. If our faith in God applies only to coming to church on Sunday mornings and is not carried through to every other part of our daily lives, then yes, I believe this statement can be true. John Calvin certainly would have had this perspective.

Here's another rather profound thought to reflect upon this week. **Jesus did not call people to become Christians, he called them to follow him – to be his disciples! College Hill Presbyterian Church, in our mission to further and live out the realm of God in our midst, needs each and every one of us to be disciples!**

Discipleship is serious business, and like a marriage or committed relationship, is not to be entered into lightly. We are asked to count the cost and decide if we are willing to pay it.

So yes, it is a fact of life, not only that everything costs us something, but when it comes to faithful discipleship we are even eager to pay the price.

Amen.